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ABSTRACT

This paper points out three data systems built and monitored by a school system in an effort to increase the frequency of correct decisions. The first was the traditional student demographic data system on attendance, dropouts, vandalism, and other information, filed by sex, age, grade, race, and school. In addition, data were collected on failure rate and mobility by school and grade. The second was an attitudinal data system gathered partly from surveys and partly from general information. The third was an attempt to develop a data system that gathered data considered to be political and/or attitudinal. These data systems are credited for allowing many people in the school system to monitor relationships between programs, teachers' and administrators' actions, and later student behavior. (Author/MLF)

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# THE USE OF UNOBTRUSIVE INDICES TO PULSATE COMMUNITY FEELINGS

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Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of Division H, American Educational Research Assocaition, Washington, D.C., March 30-April 3, 1975

THE USE OF UNOBTRUSIVE INDICES
TO PULSATE COMMUNITY FEELINGS

This paper is not a scientific treatise, it is simply a history of a number of attempts to solve a common set of problems experienced by any public school system administrator. Namely, given two or three equally viable courses of action regarding an issue of concern to the school system and the community, which course of action will cause the least trauma and the greatest amount of cooperation. The assumption here is that a comprehensive data based decision making system will increase the frequency of correct decisions, that is, those decisions that bring about greater cooperation between school system and community with a minimum of trauma from splinter groups within the community. The remainder of this paper points out three data systems that one organization built and monitored in an effort to increase the frequency of correct decisions.

The first was the traditional student demographic data system. The second was an attitudinal data system gathered partly from surveys and partly from general information. The third was an attempt at the development of a data system that gathered data that is generally considered to be political and/or attitudinal.

The student demographic system gathered data on such things as attendance, drop outs, vandalism, etc. The data was filed by sex, age, grade, race and school. In addition, data was collected on failure rate and mobility by school and grade. Initially our concern was to simply monitor the kinds of events that occurred in schools in a somewhat systematic manner. As this data base developed we attempted to make a logical leap that assumed correlations between observable behavior and human internal events. Within the same time frame, another totally independent demographic system was obtained that contained census information for each school

boundary area by census tract and census block. Within this system the categories that seemed to be most valuable were median value of a housing unit, population mobility, proportion of parents with high school diplomas and proportion of families with both parents in residence. In addition, a category of proportion of students eligible for free lunch was added to the pupil data base system. As these two independent systems progressed, curiosity prevailed and we began to make connections between the two separate systems (student file and census file). The logic of this data system connection was relatively straightforward and simple in the beginning. Two major assumptions were forwarded. The first, by monitoring data over time thereby building a base line, we could use that base line to predict future events and their times of onset. The second, by monitoring the student behaviorial effects on school system decisions we could predict the effects of future decisions and thereby influence the types of decisions that were made. Both of these assumptions hinged on a third assumption, that significant proportions of student behavior is highly correlated with student attitudes about schools. The first and second assumption developed as we gathered student data over time on a monthly basis for approximately two years. When we had a relatively comprehensive data base we began to use prediction procedures to project future behavior from past known behavior then over time as new data came in monthly, we began to monitor that data to see if there were significant departures from expectancy. When those occurred we attempted to pinpoint the causes for those significant departures. As we began to accumulate more information about the causes of departure from expectancy we began to "meddle" by attempting to cause significant departures from expectancy by various courses of administrative action. For example, if one knew the past behavior in regard to attendance, what would happen to that behavior relative to its expectancy if there was an administrative decision to radically change the dress code in that particular school? Did that in fact increase attendance, decrease attendance or cause no change? Once the corresponding behavior on the part of students was determined from that course of action, then one might logically predict future changes in behavior on the part of

students given similar courses of action by the administration. The basic procedure was a simple problem solving strategy. We were interested in deviation from expectancy and when those deviations occurred we discovered, to the best of our abilities why, then used that data at various times to cause changes in the effectiveness of the decision. This above set of procedures brought about another set of assumptions that dealt more directly with the logical leap from the assumption of correlative observable behavior within internal events. Basically this dealt with the assumption that if there was a known set of behavior about vandalism in a particular school, we assumed that that vandalism rate was also an index of student attitudes about that school, property and personnel within the school and programs operational within that school. To partially test this assumption we administered student attitudinal inventories across different schools with differing rates of vandalism. This data, along with demographic data, prompted an analysis of program strategies within the school. When those were changed we then monitored vandalism in light of that change to determine if it departed from expectancy and where that occurred we used further information to make decisions about the correctness of the strategy changes within the school. I hasten to point out here however, that there were some mistakes in this system. For example, there was a radical increase in vandalism in one particular school during the summer months, discovered by patrons within the community and personnel in the school. When we began to try to figure out why, one reason stood out over all others and that was that the street department had torn up the street a block away from the school in question and there were a lot of stones readily available and the distance between the torn up street and the windows of said school were "just a stones throw away".

In threading our way through this maze, at some point in time, we discovered the work done by Howard Merriman in Columbus, Ohio, with the development of a profile of a school system. From his work we derived our own profile which had 45 characteristics in it. One component of the profile dealt with community factors derived from census data which we found over time to be relatively stable by school boundary areas. Another factor dealt with student achievement data, a third dealt with staff

characteristics, a fourth with student demographic data noted above and the fifth per pupil expenditure data by school and category. This set of data was accumulated in files and the system of logic noted above applied to that to monitor attitudinal variables, among other things, of the staff's attitude about students, student's attitudes about staff, community attitudes about schools, and as many other relationships similar to this as we could establish. While all of this was being done we continued to administer instruments such as the Lickert Profile of A School, which is an attitudinal scale across different levels of the school district, the Purdue Teacher Opinionaire, the Early School Personality Questionnaire, the Children's Personality Questionnaire, and the High School Personality Questionnaire, among other instruments. These attitude surveys were correlated with the demographic data and the effectivness of this differential demographic system increased, in that ability to predict behavior change in advance of administrative staff action increased. I should point out here that all of this data and sets of correlates and expectancies were transmitted back to the schools as well so that they had an opportunity to see a system which monitored observable events, showed expectancies and deviations in those expectancies that were caused by, or at least could be inferred to be caused by, actions on the part of the local school staff. The basic value, as I see it now in retrospect, was that it began to prompt school administrators, local building administrators and teachers to adopt conscious courses of action to do things such as increase attendance, reduce drop outs, reduce tardiness and so on. They began to adopt behavior that brought about desired changes in student behavior rather than adopting behavior that they thought should bring about desired changes in student behavior. For example, when a school staff began to see that the relationship between their increased number of suspensions and delinquency referrals and a later concomitant increase in vandalism, drop outs and a decrease occurred, they began to see the relationships between their behavior and resultant effects on the student population and were able to infer a casual relationship between their early behavior and later student behavior. Until this system was put into effect, there

was a time lag that made it almost impossible for school staffs to make the connection between their present behavior and later behavior on the part of students. This kind of system, by bringing to bear both historical data and future data in the form of expectancies, allowed many people in the system to monitor relationships between programs, teacher, administrator action and later student behavior. This, among other factors, proved to be a valuable utilization of normally collected data. As we became relatively more effective in communicating to people throughout the system, new information about relationships between the teacher and staff behavior, administrative decisions and future student behavior, we also became interested in attempting to apply the same set of logic and systems to monitor community attitudes about school system decisions. One might assume that this is an area where evaluators or researchers should not tread, however there were, and are, other events occurring in school systems that make this writer assume that this is an area where research and evaluation people ought to tread. Several groups, such as politicians or boards of education, attempt to do what we are talking about but do not do it systematically and certainly do not do it without bias. I cite for example, a colleague of mine who felt that the board of education in his school district made decisions on the input of a very few people in the community and a select group of people at that. In attempting to test this assumption he elicited the help of 30 people. He gave those people scripts to read over the phone to the board members. The message was the same in each case, but the scripts were different enough that the message appeared to be a little different. For example, some of the scripts were to be read in a hostile manner, some were to be read in a plaintive manner and so on. As a result of thse 30 phone calls to the board of education over a period of three days in a community of over 1/2 million souls, the board felt that there was a landslide of opinion over the particular issue that the 30 phone callers were concerned about and wanted to make major revisions in policy and program in that school district due to this press of community attitude. Given that school boards operate in this manner, then research and evaluation personnel ought to be able to identify some

things to make boards more aware of community attitudes and to begin to monitor data that exists in the community systematically and without bias. At this point we began to look at various factions within the community whose job it is to know about community attitudes on a number of things.

One of the most significant groups that we discussed this issue with were politicians. In order to be successful and to remain successful, i.e., to remain elected, these people developed systems of processing data that gave them a daily unobtrusive index on the community in which they reside or in which their electorate resides. One politician, for example, claimed that he could tell the attitudes of the majority of the community by reading the classified ads and looking at the kinds of things that people were buying and selling and draw inferences from that set of data from a number of things within the community and the society as a whole. Apparently the theory is that a human can process unconnected bits of data to derive information, to generate decisions that have a higher than 50-50 chance of being correct by whatever criteria that decision maker decides is valuable. It also makes that logical leap that internal events from an individual or a collection of individuals have correlates of observable behavior that are readily observed and tabulated but of course one has to make that connection between those observable events and the internal correlates. Given that piece of the puzzle to start with, we began to look at factions within the community that might provide us with data on a regular basis in an unobtrusive manner about the attitudes of the community. We decided initially to obtain data from people within the community who had access over time to large numbers of people. Such people as ministers, members of the chamber of commerce, officers in organizations such as the NAACP, the Urban League, political organizations within the community and so on. We also obtained data from school connected personnel who had contacts with members of the community over time, such as students, teachers, teacher organizations, lay advisory groups and the community advisory committees present in most of the schools in this district. We also used information from media personnel who were assigned specifically to cover educational

events. I want to point out here that our intent was not an attempt to bug, in the sense of Watergate bugging, it was simply an attempt to systematically gather information about the community allowing all factions of the community equal input. Assuming that this accumulation of systematic and hopefully unbiased data would lead the school district in better decision making. We attempted to equate the source of information considering information from rich and poor, minority and majority, conservative and liberal, old and young and so on. The first trial run of this data system was just under way when a series of events occurred within the community where we were working, namely desegregation suits, that caused us to abandon much of what we had done in an effort to prepare the background work for the court suits that were to ensue. Therefore I have no information about the success of this kind of system as it as applied to monitor what have been traditionally political entities. I do feel however that it is a viable course of action and one that research and evaluation people ought to be concerned with. I leave it to you to decide as to what course of action you feel that kind of personnel ought to follow.

In summary I wish to point out only three things. One, that there are large amounts of information available in any school district that if brought together in a consistent, systematic and unbiased manner can facilitate increased efficiency of decision making. Secondly, while you are in the process of doing that, you begin to realize that you are doing only those things that people within the school districts normally do, the only difference is that it can be made much more systematic, reduce much of the bias and increase its efficiency. Finally, we did not do the things discussed above very well. Partly because we were learning and trying different ideas and partly because we were disturbed about the issue of big brotherism that these procedures introduced.